

# THE CATHOLIC CENTER PARTY— TRAIL-BLAZER OF HITLER

By J. J. MURPHY

*HISTORIANS in the future will need to know the full story of Hitler's rise to power, and much that they will have to record will concern the Catholic 'Center Party' in Germany. This article by Dr. Murphy establishes the fact that the 'Center Party' was the actual forerunner of Hitlerism. It supplements his important article in our issue of last April entitled, "HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HELPED HITLER TO POWER," which is now available in pamphlet form.*

**D**EFEENDERS of political Catholicism are more than a little embarrassed by the long-standing record of Vatican cooperation with Nazism. Fortunately for the truth, the array of historical facts, from the Hitler-Vatican Concordat down to Pope Pius XII's plea for a German-inspired 'negotiated peace' last June 2, two days before the Allies entered Rome, cannot be made to disappear even by the master magicians of Catholic propaganda. In desperation Roman strategists have shifted their ground and turned from Vatican politics to the history of the Catholic *Center Party* in pre-Hitler Germany in search for isolated facts that could be used to whitewash the checkered career of their church's relations with Nazism.

How successful this new strategy of Catholic propagandists has been is evidenced by a brand new book from the pen of Arnold Brecht,<sup>1</sup> a professor in *The New School for Social Research* in New York City. It would appear from this that they are succeeding in using even liberals as 'transmission belts.' Mr. Brecht undertakes, in his ponderous German way, to picture Roman Catholicism as essentially anti-totalitarian, and

Catholic Chancellor Heinrich Bruening as the patron saint of German democracy.

Facts that reveal the true relationship of Bruening and the Catholic *Center Party* to Hitlerism are a living refutation of Mr. Brecht and his Catholic inspirers. Such facts could be culled from a number of contemporary historians. But because Konrad Heiden's recent book, *Der Fuehrer*, is acknowledged by Catholic and Protestant authorities alike as the world's most authentic record of Hitler's rise to power, I will use it exclusively as a basis for the following exposé of Heinrich Bruening and his fellow-leader of the *Center Party*, Monsignor Ludwig Kaas.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CENTER PARTY AND THE BRUENING REGIME

The supreme directorate of the Jesuit order that for two centuries had direct-

<sup>2</sup> Houghton Mifflin Company, publishers of *Der Fuehrer*, have widely advertised the fact that Dr. George Shuster, prominent Catholic propagandist and authority on contemporary Germany, has endorsed the book as the most authoritative history on the rise of Nazism. Dorothy Thompson and other authorities on Germany are equally enthusiastic over Mr. Heiden's painstaking gathering of all material pertinent to this important subject.

<sup>1</sup> *Prelude to Silence*, by Arnold Brecht; N. Y., Oxford Univ. Press, 1944.

ed the Vatican in a relentless and unsuccessful war on democracy finally decided, under Pope Leo XIII, on a new strategic plan that conceded to Catholics living under a parliamentary government the right to vote. This was not done out of a new-born love of democracy, but as a last resort to wrest control of governments by a strongly organized Catholic bloc that would control the majority vote or at least the balance of power. Heiden rightly says of the Catholic party founded in Germany under Leo XIII: "The *Center* was a secular makeshift and concession to the era of parliaments; a democratic mobilization of the Church's voting millions."

The *Center Party* in Germany included all classes of Catholics from reactionary noblemen to semi-Socialist workers of the Ruhr. But it voted in parliament as a single bloc, always according to the orders of its leaders. Frequently, however, to keep the party from breaking up, the leaders had to give lip service to democracy and even on occasions make liberal gestures. None the less, at all times its basic decisions were made behind the scenes by the German hierarchy who saw to it that its leader and spokesman was one of their puppets. During the critical years of Hitler's rise to power this decisive position was held by Monsignor Kaas, a German prelate who had been made a "member of the Pope's household."

Heinrich Bruening, a bachelor and sort of lay Jesuit, was the standard-bearer of the *Center Party* during the years when Hitler rose from obscurity to supreme dictatorship over Germany. Like all the leaders of the *Center Party* Bruening shared the Catholic church's love of monarchies. Heiden (p. 420) even tells of Bruening's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Hindenburg to re-



**DR. HEINRICH BRUENING**

*Leader of the Catholic 'Center Party' and  
Reich Chancellor during Hitler's  
rise to power*

establish the Kaiser's dynasty.

The man who brought Bruening to power and kept him in the office of Chancellor (prime minister) in spite of parliamentary opposition was General Kurt von Schleicher, spokesman for the German Army, friend of Hindenburg and ardent admirer of Catholic authoritarianism. Heiden (p. 423) admits this just before he goes on to explain that Schleicher's political objective was to establish a dictatorship with a democratic front. It is interesting to note that just as Colonel Juan Perón in the present Catholic-Fascist dictatorship in Argentina disguised his supreme power by taking a subordinate position in the government of the puppet-President, so Schleicher served in Bruening's cabinet.

Chancellor Bruening throughout his regime lacked support from the vast majority of the elected representatives of the people. He ruled as virtual dic-

tator, with the assent of senile President Hindenburg, by an endless series of executive decrees and a repeated suppression of one parliament after another. There was no surer way to undermine democracy and gradually prepare the people for an outright dictatorship. Heiden (p. 394) refers to him in these words:

"The solemn embittered man, who let no one, least of all the people, see the thoughts hidden behind his spectacles must sometimes have shuddered inwardly. . . He had to promulgate his laws in opposition to parliament, as presidential decrees."

Goebbels put it in plainer language when he declared: "*It will always remain the best joke of the democratic system that it provided its deadly enemies with the means to destroy it.*"

Bruening's government made life more miserable for the masses and demoralized them to the point that they were ready to try anything, even Fascism. Heiden on page 391 relates that:

"The German employers made their aimless, unsuccessful, and heartless attack on the poor people; Bruening decreased wages by violent decrees, supposedly lowered prices, too, but not enough—and despite all the efforts and sacrifices of those who were still employed, more and more workers were discharged . . . the number of unemployed rose from three millions to over six millions, actually to far more than seven millions."

Much of Bruening's pity was for the big, reactionary Junker landlords: "At first Bruening believed it unjust to let the big Eastern landowners suffer more than their share . . . for that reason he let them have *Osthilfe*" i.e., large grants of government money (Heiden, p. 443). As a matter of fact the Bruening government spent over 2,000,000,000 marks on this aid to the estates of Eastern Germany. The Kaiser's family got a large share. An old Junker, Herr Oldenburgh-Januschau, spent his large allot-

ment to add a new estate to the three he already possessed. The revelation of these and similar scandals finally forced Bruening to end this type of *Osthilfe*, but he made no move to relinquish his control over Germany.

#### BRUENING PREPARES THE WAY FOR HITLER

Chancellor Bruening's fellow-Catholic and co-worker, Franz von Papen, frankly told him in 1931, "not to pretend that he was still governing democratically; he was already a dictator and that was good, but why conceal it?" (Heiden, p. 423).

It is self-evident that a virtual dictator like Bruening would fail to furnish the leadership that would inspire democracy to stand up and fight the growing threat of Fascism. But, worse than that, Bruening constantly talked defeatism. He frequently referred to himself as Germany's "last parliamentary Chancellor." As a Rome-inspired Catholic, whose church had defamed and condemned all forms of Socialism, he refused to form a parliamentary alliance of the *Center Party* with the liberal anti-Communist *Social Democrats*, even though he knew that this would have assured the success of German democracy and the defeat of Hitler's Nazi party. In this he sabotaged democracy just as Dollfuss and other clerical politicians were doing in Austria at the same time. Bruening even went so far as to say in parliament, on October 13, 1931, that "agreement between the parties which are necessary for such a (democratic) government is unfortunately out of the question for Germany."

As a climax to his defeatism and in a way that shows that he knew what his government was leading to, Chancellor Bruening went so far as to tip

off Fascist-minded Pierre Laval of France that Hitler was taking over a year later. Heiden (p. 423) puts it this way: "The Chancellor himself confided to his visitor, Laval, that in one year National Socialism would sit in the government." The fact that Laval was a Vatican favorite and was soon afterwards made a Papal prince is the underlying reason why these two men were so intimate and had so much in common in spite of the enmity of their two countries.

Heiden (p. 454) shows that Hitler's fundamental doctrines were in many respects based on Papal encyclicals. Bishop Alois Hudal, head of the *Collegio Teutonico* in Rome, demonstrates at great length in his book, *The Foundations of National Socialism*, written in German, the common purposes and principles of Nazism and Roman Catholicism. It is little wonder then that there was a definite affinity between Hitler and Bruening, in spite of cultural and educational differences. Heiden (p. 456) points out that: "Adolf Hitler sensed a certain affinity between himself and the silent Chancellor and expressed his feelings by an unalterable attitude of deep personal respect."

In his defeatist speeches that were meant to toll the knell of democracy and stress the urgent need of a "politically united Germany," Bruening made to order phrases and slogans that helped carry the Nazi party to victory. The people could hardly be expected to vote for a democratic government that constantly admitted its defeat and helplessness, especially when Hitler offered as an alternative a form of government that promised to give Germany the political unity that Bruening described as the country's only salvation. Referring to one of the many 'leads' that Bruening gave Hitler, Heiden (p. 411) says: "Bruening him-

self gave Hitler the catchword that things could no longer go on as they were. Thus Hitler wormed his way into the State system. . . ." Again on page 748 the same author reveals that: "Von Schleicher . . . had already under Bruening used his good offices to prepare Paris for the coming change in Germany, and Hitler was certainly acquainted with these questionable activities because he himself had drawn the greatest advantage from them."

As time went on Chancellor Bruening gave Hitler even more direct help in his struggle for power. The Bruening government practically abandoned the semblance of democracy and stood by while Hitler terrorized the masses into national hysteria that was bound to breed dictatorship. Heiden (p. 426) tells us:

"But now Bruening himself let this system fall. He was making a sort of palace revolution . . . From now on, with planned inactivity, the Reich government looked on as Hitler strengthened his private army and sent it swarming into every town and village."

Bruening's cabinet minister, General Wilhelm Groener, in the key positions of Minister of War and Minister of the Interior with power over the army and the national police, gave Hitler his backing and protection. In this he had Bruening's permission and approval:

"Groener began to reproach high Prussian police officials for spying on the National Socialist Party, and secretly or even openly supporting Hitler's personal enemies. . . . 'Hitler is a man of legality. We must do nothing against him. We must support him.' Then he intimated that this was also Bruening's opinion." (Heiden, p. 426).

Chancellor Bruening gave Hitler an interview in which he agreed to let Hitler's party name the president of the German parliament or *Reichstag*. Heiden (p. 491) says of this meeting:

"Hitler met Bruening, who seems to have listened in courteous silence; Hitler felt that Bruening had been 'very compliant' . . . From now on Hitler had his Berlin headquarters in the gilded red-plush palace opposite the Reichstag that Goering as Reichstag president was entitled to occupy."

#### CENTER PARTY SUPPORTS THE HITLER GOVERNMENT

Hitler was made Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, thanks to the financial support and political backing secured for him by Catholic nobleman Franz von Papen, who was made a Papal Chamberlain not many years after he had been expelled from the United States as a spy and saboteur during the first World War. Before and after Hitler's attainment of power, von Papen was publisher of *Germania*, a large Catholic daily newspaper and principal organ of the *Center Party*.

Though Hitler was now Chancellor and had a sizable Nazi representation in parliament, he did not control a majority of parliamentary votes. Nazism at this time had only a loose, temporary hold on the government. The *Center Party*, holding the balance of power, was still strong enough in parliament to block every piece of Nazi legislation, if it cared to add its votes to those that opposed Hitler. *Actually, at all critical junctures it not only did not join the opposition but even voted openly for Hitler's undemocratic measures, including the one that suppressed parliament and legally established Hitler's government as a dictatorship.* Bruening, though no longer Chancellor, was still a top leader in the *Center Party*. He not only voted for these Hitler laws, but played a major part in lining up a unanimous *Center* vote in favor of them.

"'We still have to carry on a very intensive struggle,' writes Goebbels on

February 1, 1933 . . . 'we need a majority (in parliament).' Practically speaking this meant an understanding with the *Center*, which in secret was exceedingly willing for an understanding." (Heiden, p. 540)

As Hitlerism gradually took over more and more control of the country, the *Center Party* took no action, and in critical moments failed even to give lip service to democracy. Duly elected members of parliament, representing Leftist parties, were violently excluded from the Reichstag, while the *Center Party* gave its silent assent. Even when the Nazis burned down the Reichstag and brazenly blamed it on the Communists in a sinister plot to terrorize the country into further fear of the 'Red menace' and subservience to Fascism, the *Center Party* supported this monstrous crime by deliberate silence. Heiden (p. 562) records the shameful fact in the following restrained words:

"On the day after the Reichstag fire, the 'Center' met to consider a course of action. Crime was openly ruling in Germany; none of these men believed that the Communists had set the fire. Monsignor Kaas, however, put through a resolution that for the present the 'Center' should 'hold its peace,' and not openly accuse the government of incendiarism and falsehood."

At no later time did the *Center Party* break this 'temporary,' conniving silence. The diabolical trick of the Nazis was accordingly accepted by the credulous masses and did more than any other piece of propaganda to lure them into the coils of Fascism.

Negotiations to give Nazism the blessing and backing of the Catholic church began as soon as Hitler was made Chancellor.<sup>3</sup> They aimed at an immediate

<sup>3</sup> Heiden on page 634 tells how the feast of the Holy Shroud in Germany, held by the Catholic church, was made into one of the most gigantic religious pageants ever held. It was a few months after Hitler came

Concordat that would provide for abolition of the *Center Party* and in its stead direct deals between the authoritarian leaders of Germany and the Vatican. As these negotiations progressed rapidly, Hitler treated the *Center* with increasing contempt. Bruening, however, continued to play up to Hitler and cooperate with him, not knowing that Pope Pius XI and his Secretary of State, the present Pope Pius XII, were selling out the *Center Party* as a makeshift that had served its purpose and would no longer be needed. The Hitler-Vatican Concordat was signed less than twenty weeks after the *Center Party* and the Nazis made Hitler legal dictator of Germany. Three days previous to the signing of the Concordat the *Center Party*, under orders from Pope Pius XI, dissolved itself. Unlike Paul Loebe, leader of the *Social Democrats*, and the leaders of other parties who fought Hitlerism, Bruening was unmolested and continued to live in Germany for almost a year after the *Center Party* was disbanded. Shortly before the Blood Purge he was allowed to leave Germany. He had rendered invaluable service to both the Vatican and the military reactionaries of Germany.

#### FRANZ VON PAPEN

Catholic propagandists make a point of identifying the *Center Party* with Bruening. If it were not too embarrassing they might also identify it with Franz von Papen, largest publicist of the *Center Party*. The highly reliable *Current Biography* (1941) states that "for years he has been the Pope's German voice." But because it is widely known that von Papen secured for Hitler the money that pushed him into

power, served with him as Vice Chancellor, and later signed for Hitler the Vatican Concordat, Catholic propagandists prefer to forget how closely identified he has been with the *Center Party* and Roman Catholicism.

Von Papen, like Bruening, was a creature of General von Schleicher, who saw in Roman Catholicism the bulwark of German militarism and reaction. Heiden (p. 456) says of Schleicher and von Papen:

"Schleicher hit on his old pal, Franz von Papen, the major of Uhlans, the diplomatic spy, the son-in-law of heavy industry—and the Catholic nobleman. For months he built up this new tool. . . . To Schleicher this shrewd, wealthy, distinguished man, with the highest connections, apparently in good odor in Rome, was 'the Center,' just as Schleicher himself was 'the Reichswehr' (German Army), or Hitler was 'National Socialism.'"

#### MONSIGNOR KAAS

During the years Bruening was in office as Chancellor, he was the *Center Party's* front man. But both during that time and after, the real boss and official spokesman of the *Center* was Papal Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, intimate of von Schleicher, confidant of the present Pope who at that time was Papal Nuncio in Berlin. Everything that Bruening did had to have first the approval of Monsignor Kaas.

After Bruening's chancellorship was terminated through a conspiracy of von Schleicher and von Papen, Monsignor Kaas himself took over open negotiations with Hitler. Heiden (p. 464) narrates as follows:

"On the day after Bruening's fall, Hindenburg received Dr. Kaas, the leader of the *Center*. The ground of German politics indeed had shifted. Kaas said: 'Yes, the *National Socialists* (Hitlerites) must now enter the government;'" Franz von Papen was made Chancellor in Bruening's place,

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to power, in the spring of 1933. Heiden remarks that at that time the Concordat negotiations "had been in progress for some time."

but Kaas refused to give him the support of his party, even though both of them agreed on giving the Nazis a large share in the government. The point on which they fell out was that Msgr. Kaas wanted *open* power for the Nazis, while von Papen thought that there was more to gain by keeping their power in the government *under cover*.

Msgr. Kaas did not deny that he wanted to see the Nazis come to power. However, he always camouflaged his purpose with the Jesuit pretext that the best way to destroy their popularity was to give them control of the government. Even pro-Catholic Arnold Brecht in *Prelude to Silence* admits that every sensible person realized from the beginning that, if Hitler were to come to power, he would destroy the German republic. It is silly to postulate that a master politician like Kaas did not

know what he was doing when he insisted on giving Hitler power.

Msgr. Kaas, however, had not waited until Bruening's dismissal to display his support of the Nazi cause. When in January, 1933, it was proposed to dissolve parliament and temporarily halt elections in order to deprive Hitler of parliamentary support, Msgr. Kaas in an open letter threatened that there would be revolution in the streets if the Reichstag were temporarily dissolved. His threat bore fruit. Hindenburg yielded to him and called for new parliamentary elections. As expected, Hitler won a sweeping victory. Heiden (p. 530) says of this threatening letter of Msgr. Kaas:

"When Kaas wrote this, he knew that *National Socialism* would inevitably come to power by way of the Reichstag (parliament)."



HITLER AND FRANZ VON PAPEN (ARROW) TRAVELLING BY PLANE.

A few weeks later, when Hitler's parliamentary support had increased and he saw the opportunity to impose his regime on the country as a dictatorship, Msgr. Kaas threw in every parliamentary vote of the *Center Party* with those of the Nazis to force through an 'Enabling Act' suspending parliament and legalizing Hitler's dictatorship. In other words, he opposed the suspension of parliament when it meant the downfall of Hitler, and favored it when it meant the establishment of Hitler's dictatorship.

Even Arnold Brecht, who writes like a Catholic propagandist of the *Commonweal* type, is forced to admit in *Prelude to Silence* (p. 97) the facts of this final betrayal of democracy at the hands of Msgr. Kaas' *Center Party*. He says:

"In the Reichstag (parliament), however, Hitler could obtain two-thirds (of the votes) in an unquestionable fashion only if the Catholic *Center* would vote for the bill. On March 23, the Catholics did indeed do so, bringing the majority up to 444 votes of Yes against the 94 Noes of the *Social Democrats* . . . If the *Center Party* had voted against the Act the figures would have been different. . . . *The Act's moral authority and technical legitimacy then could have been questioned anywhere at any time.* . . . There was not one among the *Center Party* who voted against the Act or who, although present at the meeting, abstained from voting. Even Bruening cast his vote for it."

Soon after the *Center Party* had served Kaas' ultimate purpose by legalizing the Hitler dictatorship, he betook himself to the Vatican where he helped Cardinal Pacelli, Bishop Alois Hudal and others draw up the Concordat that abolished the *Center Party* and arranged for intimate cooperation between Hitler and the Pope.

Speaking of the latter days of the *Center Party* Heiden (p. 633) has this to say:

"Kaas, the prelate, on May 6, 1933, retired from the leadership of the *Center Party*, went to Rome, and found a position in the Vatican. But Bruening, his successor, carried on, and had conferences with Hitler, who had not as yet revoked his bid for collaboration. Actually, the party of the Church, did, for a few months, share the government with the *National Socialists*; in Bavaria Count Quadt-Isny, the new leader of the (Catholic) *Bavarian People's Party*, served as Minister of Economics."

### CONCLUSION

These facts above listed are proof of the danger of Catholic political 'center parties' holding the balance of power between democratic and authoritarian political parties in all countries. Invariably these Catholic parties swing a country over to the Fascist side, since they are themselves not democratic, but under orders from the politicians of their church in Rome. A like Center Party is already in operation in the new Italian Government of Signor Bonomi, and others are bound to appear in former Fascist countries after their liberation. If these Catholic political parties were truly representative of the masses of the Catholic people, and free to throw their weight to the democratic side at critical moments, they could be of help toward progress and enlightenment. But under the dictatorial control of the Vatican, which can threaten spiritual excommunication for disobedience, they serve only as a holding force and trail-blazers for Fascism.



VAIN is all our best devotion,  
If on false foundation built;  
True religion is more than 'notion,'  
Something must be known and felt.

—Joseph Hart (1768)